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Understanding Users, Technical Communicators, and Business

Understanding Users

Technical communicators are and should be the user's advocate. All-round technical communicators are better equipped than other professionals to understand and predict whether and how people will use technology, what kinds of problems they may encounter using it, and how they can best learn how to use technology. To fulfill that role, technical communicators must know the user, preferably not in a cold scientific way, but from within, based on empathy or perspective-taking.

A major role of technical communication research, then, is to contribute to technical communicators' empathy with users. Everything we want to achieve in our discipline, in terms of contributing to society, can only be achieved through the technical communication professionals who are working in practice. Any conception of an academic discipline that systematically and gradually solves the complete puzzle of, for instance, instructing users about technological devices—comparable with the unraveling of DNA's genetic code—is not justified. It is very unlikely that all our work will eventually lead to a fundamental and exhaustive set of guidelines, which can be applied mechanically to ensure effective communication.

Two plausible but trivial arguments for that position are that there are insufficient numbers of technical communication researchers to make that happen, and that their research activities are too scattered. Both are true, but two other arguments are more fundamental. We are working in a dynamic and complex world, and our knowledge and skills are context-dependent and often tacit. It is a harmful illusion to see social sciences or humanities as a clone of the natural sciences. In such a dynamic and context-dependent environment, the practical wisdom of technical communicators is of vital importance. Understanding users is a crucial part of such practical wisdom.

Understanding Technical Communicators

Given the crucial role of technical communication practitioners, it cannot suffice to understand the users; it is important to also have an understanding of technical communicators. We need to know more about the empathic competencies of technical communicators, as basic competencies, but also in relation to their daily workload, the tools they use, and the organizational context they work in.

What exactly is the nature of the expertise of technical communicators? It is no secret that this expertise is multi-faceted, and empathic skills are just one of the many aspects. No matter how useful and insightful, existing research into the design of academic programs and the competencies asked in job postings merely scratches the surface when it comes to the competencies that make a difference, and the potential shortcomings in the competencies of technical communicators.

We need to study technical communicators in the workplace more in-depth, and learn from the expertise of experienced and seasoned professionals, and from events in specific projects. We can learn a lot from successful and unsuccessful projects. Our journal has two article categories for such experiences: "Tutorial" for the exchange of research- or experience-based insights, and "Case history" for descriptions of projects and the lessons that can be learned from them.

Understanding Business

It is also relevant to study the business context in which technical communicators have to function. I do not think there is research to prove it—at the very least I have not found such studies—but I am convinced that an organization's mission is an important factor for the user friendliness of the user support. Does an organization see the user support as a fully-fledged part of its products? Does it make the point that the quality of user instructions and the usability of its products are important?

Or is it more about money, and the availability of an acceptable looking manual?

We have seen various initiatives in the past focusing on the added value of technical communication. It may be a good idea to follow up on that line of research, with empirical studies of organizational strategies, user perceptions, and technical communicator perceptions. The research may have a critical tone: eventually, it is about the power of money and the interests of users or consumers. I can see parallels with prolific themes such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility. For a sustainable relationship with customers, high-quality user support appears to be important. To what extent can an organization afford to make users pay for functionality they will never use and are not even aware of?

About the Journal

A few announcements about the journal must be made. I regret to say that two of our long-standing Editorial Advisory Board members have decided to step back. Sherry Southard and Carolyn Rude resigned from their jobs at their universities, and chose to also leave the Editorial Advisory Board. Sherry Southard was not only an Editorial Advisory Board member; she has also been an Associate Editor in charge of Recent & Relevant for many years. I want to thank Sherry and Carolyn for their work and dedication, and for the always pleasant collaboration, and I wish them all the best.

A second announcement involves a change in the review procedure. At the end of this year, I will have installed an Editorial Review Board of expert academic researchers and practitioners. The main purpose of moving from *ad hoc* reviewers to a more limited group of dedicated researchers is to accelerate the review process. I strive to reduce the maximum turnaround time for manuscripts to two months in 2014.

Third, the new impact factors in the Web of Science have been announced. The impact factor gives an indication of the academic influence of a journal, and is computed on the basis of the number of articles published in the journal and the number of times other articles have referred to them. *Technical Communication* has a new impact factor of .750, and ranks 36th in the broad category of communication journals. The new impact factor is a little lower than last year, but close to the impact factor of two years ago. Within the sub domain of technical communication, the journal takes a stable first position.

Finally, the article Hanna Mannak, Leo Lentz, Theo Huibers, and Ted Sanders wrote in last year's volume ("Three types of children's informational Web sites: An inventory of design conventions"), which already won the Frank R. Smith Award, also received a Silver EXCEL Award from the Association Media & Publishing, in the category "Journals: Feature Article." EXCEL Awards are presented to the finest media products and publications in the industry, and the competition is strong. I am very proud of this achievement, both for the article and for the journal. My heartfelt congratulations to the authors.

In This Issue

The first article in this issue, written by Kevin Garrison, explains in detail why it is important for universities to have a usability lab, and how universities can design and implement such a usability lab at relatively low costs. In his tutorial, he draws on the specific experiences he had implementing a usability lab at Angelo State University.

The second article is written by Nicole Loorbach, Joyce Karreman, and Michaël Steehouder. They focus on the motivation and encouragement of elderly people who must use modern technological devices and their manuals. Specifically, they investigated users' reactions to two motivational elements that might be added to user instructions: verification steps and personal stories. They conclude that both elements appear to be acceptable to elderly users.

The third article, by Hans van der Meij and Jan van der Meij, discusses eight general guidelines for instructional videos. Video instructions are increasingly popular, and the phenomenon therefore calls for systematic research and analysis within the domain of technical communication. In last year's volume, Jason Swarts already presented guidelines based on an analysis of YouTube videos. In this issue, Van der Meij and Van der Meij take a more theoretical perspective. They present and illustrate guidelines based on instructional theories and tested in empirical research.